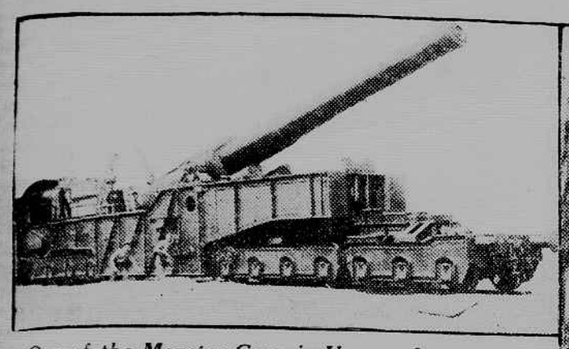
American Soldiers Are in the Thick of Real Warfare



One of the Monster Guns in Use on the Western Front

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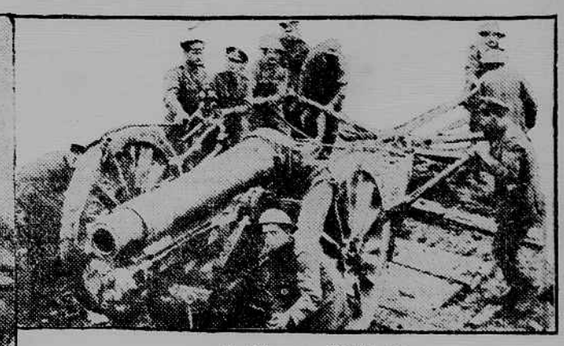
"A new war monster, a super-tank, strong enough to ride over a village and crush the life out of it!"

—From *McClure's Magazine*



A Heavy Field Gun

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IT IS eleven months since April 6, 1917, and with every passing hour America to-day is seeing her part in the war develop rapidly from theory into fact. A trench raid here, a bit of artillery work there, then a German gas attack repulsed, a counter raid by reckless doughboys, days of tense watching from slush-filled trenches, followed by nights of battle with raiders creeping in across No Man's Land —all of these elements of modern warfare have confronted American troops in France within the last ten days.

To complete the realization that America is at last on the battle line to stay is the news that in one engagement alone a score of Americans gave up their lives, and that for valor in the same struggle a score of others have just been decorated by Premier Clemenceau. Apparently Americans at home have but one more war thrill to await, and that is the news that American troops have at last gone over the top in a large-scale drive.

The outstanding event of the last ten days with the American contingent was, of course, the affair in which the doughboys repulsed a strong German raid on March 1 in the salient north of Toul. Other events of note were not lacking, it is true, in the same period. Four sentries, it was learned, have been condemned to be shot for sleeping at their posts. The War Department has been asked to review the sentence of death. General March, American chief of staff, arrives in America and deplores the unnecessary muzzling effects of the censorship in France. American gunners have again been active, particularly at a point where huge naval guns, fired from railway emplacements, assisted the French in a local operation with notable success. The Americans suffered their first gas attack of any consequence ten days ago, but a determined trench raid by a force of more than two hundred Germans on March 1 really set the pace for American participation, a fact which is confirmed by a casualty list of nearly fifty men, including twenty killed.

The war is not staying 3,000 miles away, to rephrase a famous remark, and it is now possible to build up from scattering dispatches, a picture of the recent attack, for valor in which Premier Clemenceau journeyed from Paris to decorate a number of American soldiers with medals which they will be unable to wear until they are definitely given permission by the American government.

North of Toul, in Southeastern France, just around the St. Mihiel bend of the huge reverse salient of the Verdun district and between the Meuse and the Moselle rivers, is a short sector of the French line now apparently held as a whole by American troops. Northeast of the town of Seicheprey the Germans laid their plans for a raid in force on the Americans to get prisoners—and the Berlin version of the raid says that twelve men and two machine guns were taken.

Apparently the attack was carefully prepared, for a plan of attack taken from the body of a Prussian captain killed in the fracas, including a map of the American positions, indicated every American dugout, trench, machine gun emplacement and depression in the ground within the American lines. Along the bottom of this map was a line labelled "Our front line," and along this line were five shaded portions, each marked "nest."

Four rehearsals were held for the attack, and the troops who made it were specially picked from new arrivals in the sector and told that Americans confronted them. From the five "nests," so the plan ran, groups of forty infantrymen, with one lieutenant and three pioneers to precede and five to follow, were to advance simultaneously as soon as the American trenches had been sufficiently obliterated by artillery fire. The two left-hand groups of Germans were to make a flank attack, as was the extreme right group, while the two remaining bodies were to attack directly.

The hour chosen was early morning, while a driving wet snow rendered No Man's Land a veiled, slippery morass, where barbed-wire entanglements and shell holes melting into the gray background of snow and landscape rendered visibility very short. It was about the hour that troops training in the various American cantonments are roused from their comfortable barracks to a day of play-warfare, theory and training camp amusement. "Over there" it was 5:05 a. m.

First came a rain of heavy "seventy-seven" shells, gas and otherwise, which for a half hour were concentrated upon a short section of American trenches, while long-range artillery in the rear began to seek out the American battery positions. Soon gas shells followed, after the fashion of those released a few days previous in the first serious gas attack suffered by the American troops.

The intensity of the bombardment may be judged in various ways. For one thing, the woods back of the salient were quickly shot to pieces, shivered and stripped of small limbs much as a flight of grasshoppers will devastate a field of corn until only bare stumps and ragged trunks remain.

Survivors of the attack have registered other and more intimate pictures. In the front-line trenches, according to an old sergeant, a captain who was later killed sent a number of his men to an intermediate trench when the bombardment started: "The Dutchmen's shells were busting all around us, but only a few landed in our position. We were up to our necks in mud, which saved us from a lot of flying shrapnel."

A Georgia youth, who looked to one correspondent to be hardly more than eighteen, was in the front line when the shells began coming over. Lying on a cot in a hospital back of the lines, he said:

"It seemed like every shell in the world started coming our way. Where the Germans got them is more than I know. I never believed that so many existed. One burst near where I was. A piece hit a fellow on the other side of me who came from Texas. The corporal picked him up and started with him for a first aid station in the midst of a perfect shower of dirt and mud which was being kicked up.

"I don't know whether he ever got there or not. I at once got into a machine-gun emplacement with another corporal, whose home is in Missouri, leaving my rifle outside. Things got so hot we decided to try to get to a steel shelter at the end of a trench.

"The corporal went first, but a few feet away a shell exploded almost on him and killed him. I stepped out and saw that my rifle had been blown to pieces. This left me defenceless, so I started in another direction, hoping to find a rifle or a pistol, because I knew the Germans would be around soon. About the same time a piece of shell hit me on the left side and down I went. A sergeant yelled an order for me to go to a first-aid station.

"I was just approaching the station in the rear of two stretcher-bearing teams who were proceeding, bent over, to escape, if possible, the flying pieces of shell, when a shell plumped down on top of the station, exploded and wiped it out. A piece of rock hit me in the head. When I woke up some stretcher-bearers had me, hauling me over the shell-holes.

"I've sure got to hand it to those men with the Red Cross on their arms. They all worked like dogs in that hell out there. They seemed to have but one idea to do their duty and apparently cared nothing for their own lives while doing it. They were game right to the core."

Other troops, in the dugouts when the firing started, naturally registered their first impressions of the attack through the uproar that penetrated the ground above them. A New Jersey artilleryman said:

"I was asleep in the dugout when the fun began. We ran out to the gun. The shells were raining down all around. Then came the order for a barrage, and we let them have it. One shell hit near the pit and loosened the logs overhead. After that every time we fired the concussion brought down one or two logs. Mud, stones and pieces of shell came in at the front. Five spokes were knocked from one wheel of the carriage and the gun muzzle was nicked. Two or three men were slightly hit and laid away at the end of the pit, while the rest of us kept on firing.

"Suddenly a piece of steel came through the gun shield which I was behind and hit me in the shoulder. About that time we were all carried to the dressing station, and here I am. I don't mind this wound, but I hope to the Lord it gets well soon, so that I can get back with my outfit."

Then, amid the driving snow, to the sound of bursting hand grenades and rifle and machine fire, while the gray dawn of 6 o'clock was illumined by the flare of star shells, the German bombardment lifted. With an American barrage whistling over their heads, the doughboys rallied from dugouts, shattered trenches and communication ditches to meet the German attack hand to hand.

Over two hundred in number, the invaders came sweeping forward under the protection of their own fire, apparently intending to make a big haul and quickly retire. Expecting an easy time, the two centre groups of Germans plunged forward to the American dugouts, but found that their plan of attack would not work. They were met by heavy machine-gun fire, and so tried to follow the other parties around the flank.

Here, it appears, an American captain rallied his men with rifles and machine guns and went ahead through the wire entanglements into No Man's Land and waited for the enemy, whom he expected to be driven out by his comrades in the trenches. Soon this occurred, with the result, however, that with Germans in between them, the two opposing groups of Americans for a time were firing in the direction of each other. In this fight the captain was killed, the first member of the 1917 class of West Point to fall in action.

The battle raged briefly but bitterly in front of the wire entanglements and in and around shell holes. Shoulder to shoulder in the dim light the opponents fought, the Americans with rifle fire, gun butts and fists, the Germans with hand grenades, while the American barrage began to sweep back and forth across No Man's Land. Soon the snow was littered with bodies, hand grenades, explosives intended to blow up the American dugouts, and incendiary bombs which the Germans had no opportunity to use.

Meantime in the dugouts and trenches on either flank of the German attack a confused battle raged. In one case a German lieutenant approached the entrance of a dugout and called out to those within, "Come out, American!" An American sergeant came out like a hornet, killed the lieutenant and two soldiers, and when his captain was killed took command of his men in front of the wire and inflicted further losses on the enemy. He was among those decorated by Premier Clemenceau. According to a Kansas man, the dead captain was last seen kneeling alongside a spitting machine gun, blazing away at the Germans with his automatic revolver. "I saw him fall flat," added the private.

The hand-to-hand contest quickly ended with the flight of the Germans to their trenches through the American barrage. In the American trenches German and American dead lay mingled alike. In the wire the bodies of two German officers were clearly visible, and many others lay on the trampled and bloodstained snow. Two American dugouts were wrecked by artillery fire.

How the troops felt afterward indicates who they thought won. A young Alabaman found he had lost his safety razor and had to let the company barber shave him. "He should be a carver at a cook wagon," the victim groaned. Another's complaint was that, after searching the ruins of his dugout for his sweetheart's picture, he found it, in halves, ruined beyond recognition. An Iowa youngster went about complaining because the only decent pack of cards in his squad was scattered in fifty-two different directions when a shell burst in his dugout.

A New Yorker, with his arm in a sling, credited his battered wrist watch with saving his hand from being completely severed. All the infantrymen displayed keen distress over the loss of their comrades, especially the captain, who, said one, "was a fine officer, and took fine care of his men. Any one of the company would have gone through hell at his order."

When Earth and Sky Are Full of the Thunderous Fury of Battle

"WITH OUR SOLDIERS IN FRANCE," a book by Sherwood Eddy, just published by The Associated Press, contains a good deal of solid and illuminating comment upon activities "over there." The author writes of his trip to the fighting front in Flanders:

"In the midst of our work at a base camp there came a sudden call to go 'up the line' to the great battle front. Leaving the railway, we took a motor and pressed on over the solidly paved roads of France, which are now pulsing arteries of traffic, crowded with trains of motor transports pouring in their steady stream of supplies for the men and munitions for the guns. Now we turn out for the rumbling tank-like caterpillars, which slowly creep forward, drawing the big guns up to the front; then we pass a light field battery. Next comes a battalion of Tommies swinging down the road, loaded like Christmas trees with their cumbrous kits, sweating, singing, whistling as they march by with dogged cheer toward the trenches.

"We have crossed the Somme with its memories of blood, on across Northern France, and now we have passed the Belgian frontier and are in the historic fields of Flanders, where the creaking windmills are still grinding the peasants' corn and the little church spires stand guard over the sleeping villages. A turn of the road brings us close within sound of the guns, which by night are heard far across France and along the coasts of England. Soon we enter villages which lie within range of the enemy's 'heavies,' with their shattered window glass, torn roofs, ruined houses, tottering churches and deep shell holes in the streets. Now we are in the danger zone and have to put on our shrapnel proof steel helmets and box respirators to be ready for a possible attack of poison gas.

Ground That Has Become Grimly Historic

"Another turn in the road and the great battlefield rises in grim reality before us. Far to the left stands the terrible Ypres salient, so long swept by the tide of war, and away to the right are the blasted woods of 'Plug Street.' Right before us rises the historic ridge of Messines, won at such cost during the summer. We are standing now at the foot of the low ridge where the British trenches were so long held under the merciless fire of the enemy. From here to the top of the ridge the ground has been fought over, inch by inch and foot by foot. It is blasted and blackened, deep seamed by shot and shell. The trees stand on the bare ridge, stiff and stark, charred and leafless, like lonely sentinels of the dead. The ground, without a blade of grass left, is torn and tossed as by earthquake and volcano. Trenches have been blown into shapeless heaps of debris. Deep shell holes and mine craters mark the advance of death. Small villages are left without one stone or brick upon another, mere formless heaps, ground almost to dust. Deserted in wild confusion, half buried in the churned mud, on every hand are heaps of unused ammunition, bombs, gas shells and infernal machines wrecked or hurriedly left in the enemy's flight.

"Here on June 7, at 3 o'clock in the morning, following the heavy bombardment which had been going on for days, the great attack began. In one division alone the heavy guns had fired 46,000 shells and the field artillery 180,000 more. The sound of the firing was heard across France, throughout Belgium and Holland and over the Surrey downs of England, 130 miles away.

"The Messines ridge is a long, low hill, only about 300 feet in height, but it commands the countryside for miles around and had become the heavily fortified barrier to bar the Allied advance between Ypres and Armentieres. Since December, 1914, the Germans had seamed the western slopes with trenches, a network of tunnels and of concrete redoubts. Behind the ridge lay the German batteries. For months this ridge had been mined and countermined by both sides, until the English had placed 500 tons of high explosives—that is, approximately 1,000,000 pounds of amminol—beneath nineteen strategic points which were to be taken. At the foot of the ridge, along a front of nine miles, the British had concentrated their batteries, heavy guns and vast supplies of ammunition. Day and night for a week before the battle began the German positions had been shelled. At times the hurricane of fire died down, but it never ceased. By day and by night the German trenches were raided and explored. A large fleet of tanks was ready for the advance. Hundreds of aviators cleared the air and dropped bombs upon the enemy, assailing his ammunition dumps, aerodromes and bases of supplies. The battle had to be fought simultaneously by all the forces on the land, in the air and in the mines underground. All the horrors of the cyclone and the earthquake were harnessed for the conflict.

Probably the Most Terrific Explosion Ever Heard

"In the early morning a short, deathly silence followed the week's terrific bombardment. At 2:50 a. m. the ground opened from beneath, as nineteen great mines were exploded one by one and fountains of fire and earth like huge volcanoes leaped into the air. Hill 60, which had dealt such deadly damage to the British, was rent asunder and collapsed. It was probably the greatest explosion man ever heard on earth up to that time. Then the guns began anew to prepare for the attack and a carefully planned barrage dropped just in front of the English battalions as they advanced. As the men came forward the barrage was lifted step by step and dropped just ahead of them, to pulverize the enemy and protect the British troops. By 5 o'clock Messines itself was captured by the fearless Australians. There was a most desperate struggle just here where we were standing at Wytschaete. All morning the battle raged along this line, but by midday it was in the hands of the dashing Irish division. Seven thousand prisoners were taken, while the British casualties, owing to the effective protection of their terrific barrage, were far less than the German and only one-fifth of what they had calculated as necessary to take this strategic position.

"We make our way up to the crest of the Messines ridge, where we can look back on the conquered territory and forward to the new lines. The great guns are in action all about us. They are again wearing down the enemy in preparation for the next advance. For the moment we feel only the grand and awful throb of vast titanic forces in terrible conflict. Day and night, in the air, on the earth and beneath it, the war is slowly or swiftly being waged. The fire of battle smoulders or leaps into flames or vast explosions, but never goes out.

"Above us the very air is full of conflict. Hanging several hundred feet high are half a dozen huge fixed kite-balloons, with their occupants busily observing, sketching, mapping or reporting the enemy's movements. Each of these is a target for the attacking aeroplanes and the occupants must be ready at a moment's notice to leap into a parachute when they are shot down. High above these balloons a score of British planes are darting about or dashing over the enemy's lines, acting as the eyes of the huge guns hidden away behind us. We are looking at one far up, seemingly soaring in peace like a graceful bird poised in the air, when suddenly we see it surrounded by a dozen little white patches of smoke which show that it has come within range of the enemy's anti-aircraft guns and the clouds of shrapnel are bursting about it. Most of them break wide of the mark and it sails on unscathed over the enemy's lines. Just above us is hanging a German taube, obviously watching us and the automobile which we had left below in the road, while the British huge anti-aircraft guns near by are feeling for it, shot after shot.

"We duck into our little Y. M. C. A. dugout, just under the crest of the ridge. It is an old, deserted German pit for deadly gas shells, which even now are lying about uncomfortably near, in heaps still unexploded. Here the men going to and from the trenches come in for hot tea or coffee and refreshments night and day. A significant sign forbids more than thirty men to congregate at once in this exposed spot, as sometimes these Y. M. C. A. dugouts are blown to atoms by a shell. The one down below in 'Plug Street' has been blown to bits and the man in the one just up the line has been under such fire for several days that he will have to abandon his dugout.

"Just in front of us over the ridge is the first line of the present British front. There is no time to build trenches now or to dig themselves in. They just hold the broken line of unconnected shell holes or swarm in the great craters which are held by rapid-fire machine guns. The men go out by night to relieve those who have been holding the ground during the previous day. It is harder for the enemy's artillery to locate and destroy men scattered in these irregular holes and craters than if they were in a clear line of trenches. The British front faces down the slope toward the bristling German lines, dotted with hidden snipers and studded with sputtering machine guns. As the evening falls the batteries behind and all about us open fire. Flash after flash of spurting flame leaps out from the great guns. Boom upon boom, deep voiced and varied, follows from the many calibred guns in the darkness, till the night is lurid and the ground beneath us quivers with the earthquake of bombardment.

"High above we hear the piercing shriek of the shells speeding to their fatal mark, and below the crash of the exploding shells of the enemy, which toss the earth in dark waves into the air in the black surf of war. Gun after gun now joins the great chorus, swelling and falling in a hideous symphony of discordant sounds. The whole horizon is lit up and aflame. The sky quivers and reflects the flash of the great guns, as with the constant vibration of heat lightning. Flares and Verey lights of greenish yellow and white turn the night into ghastly day and like the lurid flames of an inferno light up the battlefield, while the rifles crackle in the glare. Here a parachute light, like a great star, hangs suspended almost motionless above us, lighting up the whole battlefield, and now a burning farmhouse or exploding ammunition dump illuminates the sky as from some vast subterranean furnace flung open upon the heavens. All the long sullen night the earth is rocked by slow intermittent rumbling, till with the silent dawn the birds wake and the war giants sink for a few hours in troubled sleep. Then the new day breaks and the warplanes climb in the clear morning air to begin the battle afresh."

In another chapter Mr. Eddy, setting down his observations while with General Pershing's force, asks: "What is the life that our boys are living here at the front?" And this is his answer to an ever-interesting question:

A Day With One of General Pershing's Battalions

"Let us go through a day with the battalion quartered in this village. At 5 o'clock in the morning the first bugle sounds. The boys are quickly on their feet, dressing, washing, getting ready for the day's drill. In half an hour they are tucking away a generous breakfast provided by Uncle Sam of hot bacon, fried potatoes and coffee, good home-made bread and as much of it as a man can eat. They get meat twice a day and we have found no soldiers in Europe who receive rations that compare with the food that our boys receive.

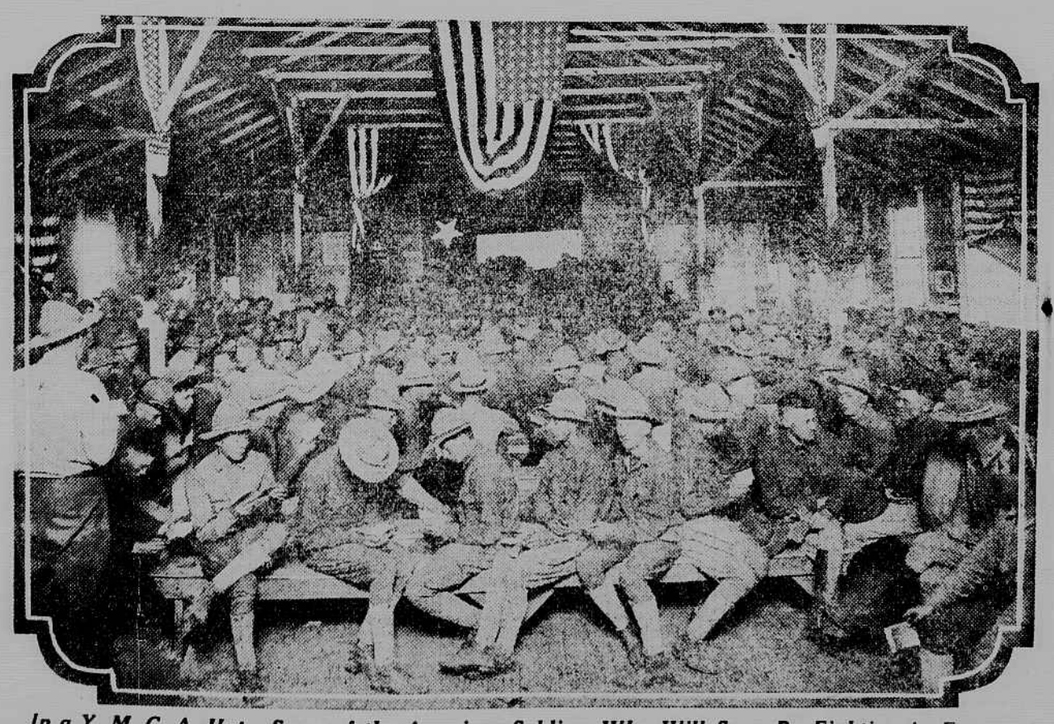
"By 6:40 a. m. the men have reached the drill ground on the open fields above the village and are ready to begin the eight or nine hours of hard work and exercise that is before them. Half of each day is spent with the French troops, learning more quickly with an object lesson before them, and the remaining half-day is spent in training by themselves. The French squad goes through the drill or movement, then the American battalion, after watching them, is put through the same practice. They are trained in bayonet work and charges, in musketry and machine gun practice, in the handling of grenades and the throwing of bombs. There is evidence of speeding up and an apparent pressure to get them quickly into shape in order to take their place in the trenches before the winter sets in. A few weeks at the front with the French troops will soon give them experience, and after a winter in the trenches the men of these first divisions will doubtless form the nucleus for a large American army, and provide the drillmasters quickly to train the men for the spring offensive.

"On the day we were there, after a hard morning's drill, the colonel assembled three battalions and put them through the first regimental formation and the first regimental review since landing in France. The men of the 1st, 2d and 3d battalions marched by, and one could quickly contrast the disciplined movements of the veterans or old soldiers with the crude drill of the new recruits, some of whom could not keep step or smoothly execute the movements.

. . . . . .

"After nine hours of hard drill, the men swung cheerfully down the hillside into the village street. Now they have lined up, and with ravenous appetites are waiting for the evening meal. We are almost as hungry as they, and are glad to share the meal with them. Here on the table are huge piles of good home-made bread. It is almost the first white bread we have seen after months of brown war bread in England and France. Here are heaping plates of good pork and beans, tinned salmon, plenty of fried potatoes and piping hot coffee. This is followed by a delicious pudding, as good as the men would have had in their own homes. Well fed, well clothed, well equipped, sleeping under Uncle Sam's warm blankets on comfortable 'Gold Medal' cots, our boys are well cared for."

Sammies Off Duty



In a Y. M. C. A. Hut. Some of the American Soldiers Who Will Soon Be Fighting in France

—Courtesy Associated Press

The Starry Banner in France

A NARROW road in France. One comes to a sudden turn. A clearing and then, fluttering against the setting sun, the starry banner. . . .

Isaac F. Marcosson, the writer, who long ago lost track of the number of times he has commuted back and forth across the Atlantic since this war began, told how he reacted to such a scene in a talk here during the week. He said:

"I had been with the Italian armies, I had been through Spain, and I came to a little town late one afternoon in the North of France, and I realized that I had left the domain of peace behind me and I was back again in the domain of death and the domain of fighting men. I got off this train and I saw stalwart and brawny but smooth-faced men in khaki on the station platform rolling cigarettes. I heard such noises as 'Can that noise,' and 'Let's beat it back,' and I found that after travelling under many flags and through many countries, at last I had come into the domain of American people.

"I got in a car and I started up the road, and saw Ford cars and United States automobile army trucks, and the American troops marching, and just as the sun was about to set I came to the turn in the road and I saw in the clearing, against that setting sun, the American flag.

"I have never seen anything in this war and never expect to see anything again that thrilled me and stirred me as much as the sight of those Stars and Stripes whipped out by the winds of France, raised over that soil for the great redemption.

"It was on that afternoon and I got to a small town and I stopped at a big white building with the American flag on one side and the French flag on the other, and almost before I knew it I was upstairs and was shaking the hand of a big man who had two stars and a silver eagle on his shoulder. He had wonderful eyes, and you know that he was a gentleman and a soldier, and that man was General Pershing. As I stood there, when the time came for me to go it was night, and we stood at the window. . . .

I saw the camp fire of the American unit and I heard American voices singing, and then there came back over the night air the mournful and yet beautiful sound which is taps. Then this big man who stood there, who was the god of a hundred and ten million hopes and the repository of a hundred and ten million fears, was silent, and I was silent. We were both thinking the same thing, because of the sound of those marching men, the rattle of those shoes and the rumble of those guns, the call of that American bugle across the night air.

"It meant one thing. America was up and doing at last, that old era of aloofness and indifference was ended, and I knew the awakening had come to Old Glory."